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COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Sixteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 324TH MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York
on Wednesday, 22 January 1997 at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. KHAN

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The meeting was called to order at 3.25 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN (continued)

Third periodic report of Venezuela (continued) (CEDAW/C/VEN/3, CEDAW/C/1997/CRP.1/Add.5)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Martínez and Ms. Guzman (Venezuela) took places at the Committee table.

2. Ms. GONZÁLEZ MARTÍNEZ said that, despite the fact that Venezuela had been in the vanguard of international action to combat violence against women, it had not yet adopted its own sexual and domestic violence bill. She hoped that the active network of Venezuelan women's organizations would be able to achieve its adoption in the near future.

3. Because Venezuela had been among the first countries in its region to establish a Ministry for Women's Affairs, the information provided on that subject was of great interest. In her view, it was the sovereign right of each State party to decide on the structure of its own mechanism to promote the status of women, whether a commission, an office or a ministry. What mattered was the impact of its activities and whether progress was being made. Many countries had also experienced the restrictions Venezuela had reported due to economic crises, but she wondered whether the Government was stressing continuity in its policies and mechanisms for women, or whether they had been buffeted about by changes in Government structures.

4. Ms. BUSTELO GARCÍA DEL REAL acknowledged that the delegation of Venezuela had faced time limitations in preparing its replies to the numerous questions of the pre-session working group; that was among the reasons why the statistical data requested in the guidelines for preparation of reports would have been helpful, as it would show whether the Convention was being implemented in practice. Nevertheless, the Committee should give consideration to changing its procedures to allow States parties to receive questions earlier.

5. With regard to legislative reform and the sexual and domestic violence bill, the Committee's General Recommendation 19 and the report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, which contained a model law on violence against women, might be helpful in efforts to achieve its adoption.

6. Under the Beijing Platform for Action, the Committee had a mandate to review the legislation of States parties on abortion. The laws in Venezuela were among the most restrictive in Latin America, and the Platform might be a useful tool for opening a debate on modifying them. She found it shocking that adolescents could not obtain contraception without parental permission, which would prevent them from taking responsibility for their own sexuality. Further, the report had noted that if a foreign woman married a Venezuelan national, she could be granted Venezuelan nationality, but had not indicated whether the same was true of a foreign man who married a Venezuelan woman.

7. For the next report, more data were needed: for example, the number of children in day care, the number of women taking advantage of cervical and breast cancer screening programmes, and more current data on women's access to education in general and access of rural women in particular, in addition to the school drop-out rate because of teenaged pregnancy.

8. With regard to the replies on article 10, it appeared that a wide range of women's organizations and individuals were aware of the importance of the Convention, yet little progress had been made in its implementation since the previous report. If that was due to a lack of effective political mechanisms and a plan of action with specific targets, the Convention itself could be extremely helpful in developing them.

9. Ms. SATO said that it would be interesting to know why more women than men migrated to cities in Venezuela, and whether better job opportunities were available to women than to men in urban areas. It appeared that, in cases of adoption, only adoptive mothers received maternity benefits and leave; she wondered what provisions had been made for adoptive fathers. The situation where women were paid less than the legal minimum wage was a serious one, and she wondered whether any penalty was imposed on employers who violated the relevant standards.

10. Ms. SHALEV said that the figures regarding the percentage of the gross national product spent on health and the national public expenditure on health as a portion of the total Government budget should be clarified, as those figures were important for monitoring compliance with the Convention. She was troubled by the indications of a decrease in expenditure on health alongside an increase in maternal mortality, and would like more information on the reasons for those trends. The response that budgetary restrictions had caused the shortage of contraceptives and that non-governmental organizations would make up the shortfall was inadequate. That would seem to indicate that women were being affected disproportionately by the current structural adjustment programmes. With regard to teenagers and contraception, the Government should refer to paragraphs 93 and 267 of the Beijing Platform for Action. She would also like to know whether, in the limited number of circumstances where abortions were legal, they were covered under the national health insurance scheme.

11. Ms. BARE urged the Government of Venezuela to continue its cooperation with non-governmental organizations; evidence abounded of their effectiveness in such areas as health care, legal literacy, and advocacy. In the next report, more information was needed on existing mechanisms for monitoring whether employers were meeting their legal obligations concerning equal pay for work of equal value, along with statistics on the number of violations reported.

12. Ms. MARTÍNEZ (Venezuela) said that the question of the low wages paid to women was very difficult because women themselves were sometimes prepared to accept lower wages than men so as to have employment; socio-cultural and economic factors came into play. The same considerations applied to the question of penalizing employers for paying low wages to women. The main challenge was to enhance women's self-esteem.

13. The proportion of the State budget allocated to health had been very low; recently doctors, including emergency room staff, had gone on strike to protest

against the lack of supplies and low salaries. The congress was currently considering the possibility of allocating 10 per cent of the State budget to the health sector.

14. While women had access to early detection services for uterine and breast cancer, they often failed to take advantage of them, preferring to go to traditional healers or to use herbal remedies. Greater educational efforts were needed in that respect.

15. An Independent Women's Institute would be established after the Equal Opportunities for Women Act was approved by Congress. The National Women's Council was promoting the establishment of the Institute, which would be an autonomous body.

16. Ms. GUZMAN (Venezuela) said that the Sectoral Office for the Advancement of Women had had no decision-making power, no organizational structure and no budget. The National Women's Council was promoting the establishment of a national mechanism that would be able to implement policies for women and would have its own budget and organizational structure, and would report directly to the Presidency, rather than being part of a ministry.

17. Ms. MARTÍNEZ said that she would make available to Ms. Bustelo García del Real a copy of the decree requiring that educational institutions should not dismiss girls who became pregnant.

18. Ms. SCHÖPP-SCHILLING said that she had been disturbed to hear that women themselves often accepted low wages; she hoped that that comment did not imply that women were being blamed for the situation, and that that attitude did not underlie policymaking in Venezuela. The reality was that, in many countries, neither private enterprises nor, in many cases, the public sector offered equal pay for equal work or work of comparable value; it was a structural element of both free market and socialist planned economics that women's work was exploited and was not valued either in the home or in the labour market. Under the Convention, it was the obligation of States parties to monitor the human rights situation of women in order to ensure that their work was not being exploited and that they received equal pay for equal work, and that efforts were undertaken to evaluate women's work in the labour market so as to address the problem of the usually lower wages in the feminized sectors.

The meeting rose at 4.15 p.m.